

Pornography and Its Impact on Adolescent/Teenage Sexuality

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Abstract

Adolescents/Teenagers are exposed to pornography due to a variety of factors and it is accepted as a process of sexual exploration/normal development of sexuality. However, early exposure to pornography and unregulated/excess exposure to pornography during the formative years of adolescence has been seen to have various long-term deleterious effects on sexual maturation, sexual behavior, Internet addiction, and overall personality development. To safeguard the growing minds of the teens from the harmful effects of pornography, few rules/regulations have been passed in India as well as banning of porn sites. However, there are very limited research on the impact of pornography on various aspects of adolescents' growth and development. This mini-review covers the issues pertinent to the effect of pornography with regard to adolescent sexuality.

Keywords

Adolescence, sexuality, impact, pornography

Introduction

Pornography is defined as the portrayal of sexual subject matter for the purpose of sexual arousal. It is usually presented in various forms using magazines, videos, books, and video games. In the current scenario, it has become widespread and easily accessible to almost all the age groups due to easy availability of Internet usage. Studies have noted that early intentionally exposure to pornography use in children and adolescents can lead to delinquent behavior, high-risk sexual behavior, and substance use.^{1,2}

Adolescents are exposed to pornography more frequently due to a variety of factors, including the normal development of sexuality that peaks during adolescence, sexual curiosity (a growing need for sexual knowledge during puberty), ineffective parent-child sexuality communication, and a lack of formal sex education. Children and adolescents may be more vulnerable to the effects of pornographic content because they frequently lack sexual experience or understanding. Pornographic practices or messages could seem more realistic to a young adolescent who hasn't developed a paradigm for realistic sex compared to an adult with greater maturity or life experience.

Pornography is both fascinating and interesting to many teenagers. Young people have used sexually explicit media to stimulate themselves and satiate their curiosity about nudity

and sexual activity for many years.³ Researchers have explored the reasons adolescents watch pornography and noted that they do it, first to cope with their problems as a kind of amusement when bored or depressed, or to raise their mood (arouse and masturbate).⁴ Second, some of them could find it enjoyable to imagine interacting with the shown models/actors. Third, watching porn together can foster tighter social/peer bonds and help sustain or improve peer relationships. Last but not least, teenagers may watch out of habit or because of dependence on pornographic media.

In this mini-review, we had tried to summarize the effects of pornography usage on adolescent sexuality and its implications, with special reference to India.

Pornography and Puberty

Considering potential hazards to the development, concerns have been expressed about the exposure of adolescents to

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pornography. Researchers have tried to analyze how pornography affects adolescents' cognitive, behavioral, and emotional reactions.⁵ Adolescents typically go through sexual maturity, which includes bodily changes, sex hormones, fantasies, sexual interest, and masturbation experimentation. Teenagers usually see pornography before engaging in coupled sexual activity, and this use is commonly combined with masturbation. One of many adolescents' first externally stimulated sexual experiences may be watching and masturbating to porn. Sexual initiation at younger age is linked with negative outcomes in adulthood.⁶ Evidence also suggests that exposure to pornography accelerates sexual development.⁷

Pornography and Internet Use

In addition to what teenagers learn directly from their family or peers regarding sex, media use via Internet can function as a "role model" and provide normative counsel. Wright developed his 3A model (Acquisition, Activation and Application) to further define the script concept, assuming that voluntary and willful exposure to pornographic media can lead to the acquisition of cognitive and behavioral scripts presented in these media, their activation in specific real-life social contexts, and their application in the "real-life" social setting, for example, a romantic or sexual encounter.⁸ Further, it has been observed that sexually explicit media portrays a distorted and inaccurate view of sexuality such as "sex is glamorous, enjoyable, and risk-free, and casual sexual encounters are the norms."⁹

In the pornographic imagination via Internet media use, "safe sex" is an exception.¹⁰ According to many researchers, pornography videos frequently reflect the desires of predominantly male audience¹¹ and other researchers, have nuanced the notion that women are considered only as "tools" for male enjoyment.¹² Risky sexual activity is strongly correlated with 1 specific factor: sexual content or sexually explicit media.¹² Adolescents who are exposed to sexually explicit media via Internet are more prone to develop promiscuous sexual attitudes, which are strongly linked to dangerous sexual actions later in life. It is estimated that the teenagers are among the most frequent users of porn and believe what they see in the media is true.¹³

Additionally, teens are impacted by how they interact with (eg, use and comprehend) the media and frequently permit the media to define and influence their sex, love, and relationships. Access to pornography is strictly controlled by law in many nations, which increases its appeal to teenagers due to the "forbidden fruit" effect.¹⁴ Information on what adolescents specifically watch is scarce. Only a handful of research had been conducted on adolescent pornography usage. Few studies have revealed that younger adolescents, compared to older counterparts, are more inclined to consume affection-themed explicit material, while the older adolescents preferred dominance-themed porn.¹⁵

Pornography and Its Impact on Sexual Maturity

The usage of pornography is significantly gendered. Much data has been presented showing that males are more likely than females to seek pornography.^{4,16,17} B  the et al¹⁸ discovered a similar, very early, and high prevalence of pornography usage among heterosexual, cisgender, and sexual/gender minority boys, and lesser prevalence among their feminine counterparts.

The timing of pornographic exposure may play a significant role on the attitudes and ideas that children and adolescents have about sex and sexuality, as suggested by the sexual script theory. According to the sexual script hypothesis, messages, and representations of sexuality in culture and society teach individuals "the when, where, how, with whom, and why of sexuality."¹⁶ They are more likely to interpret pornographic content as being similar to real-world sex and think of pornography as a reliable source of knowledge about sex if they are exposed to it more frequently. Adolescent males who viewed pornography more frequently were more likely to not use a condom during their most recent sexual encounter.¹ Early sexual debut, inconsistent condom use, unsafe sex, and several partners are some of the harmful consequences of exposure to pornography during adolescence.¹⁹

Adolescent pornography use is generally recognized as being significantly linked to early partnered sexual behavior, more sexual partners, lower relationship satisfaction, and lower sexual satisfaction during adolescence.²⁰ Additionally, more pornography usage in adolescents is associated with stronger sexual liking for the shown sexual behaviors, agreement with gender stereotypes and power dynamics in sexual relationships, acceptance of premarital sex, and obsession with sexual fantasies. These views about sexual relationships could lead to dissonance, disillusionment, or unmet expectations as they seek to form relationships in adolescence, if they aren't challenged. Dissatisfaction and anxiety may result from comparison with pornographic materials, particularly when their partner or own behavior does not resemble the pornographic material. The link between excessive pornographic viewing and sexual dysfunction has also been much debated.²¹

Pornography and Its Impact on Sexual Activities and Overall Behavior

According to researchers in the tradition of social cognitive theory²² or cultivation theory,²² extensive exposure to media depictions of ideas, perceptions, and behavior patterns may encourage adolescents to adopt them and enhance the development of their sexual scripts.^{23,24}

Several research give empirical evidence that pornography can increase sexuality-tinged behavior. For example, Braithwaite et al. investigated the relationships between porn viewing, script acquisition, and sexual risk behavior over time.²⁵ They discovered that students who watched pornography more frequently "hooked up" with sex partners more often, had more

Table 1. Healthy Sexual Behavior vs Porn-Driven Behaviors.

	Healthy Sexual Behavior	Pornography-Driven Sexual Behaviors
1	Sex is mutual caring	Sex is “using/dominating someone”
2	Sex is mutual intimacy with a partner	Sex is “doing, screwing someone”
3	Sex is a natural drive	Sex is compulsive act
4	Sex is personal intimacy	Sex is “public commodity”
5	Sex is emotional connection “making love”	Sex is physical enjoyment
6	Sex is lasting satisfaction	Sex is impulse gratification

“one-night stands,” and planned to have more sex partners in the future than peers who watched pornography less frequently.

In addition to gender, age and academic level are important factors in pornography use. Pornography is consumed more frequently by older adolescents than by younger adolescents, and by adolescents with lower academic success than by those with greater achievement.^{26,27}

Pornography use and aggressive behavior in the classroom was found to be significantly correlated, with higher consumption levels being associated with more aggressive behavior.²⁷ Exposure at a younger age makes individuals receptive to watching coercive or violent porn. Watching more hardcore pornography containing abuse, rape, and child sex is associated with the normalizing of this behaviors.²⁷ Exposure to sexually explicit content has a strong influence on adolescents’ sexually permissive attitudes.

Over time, the embarrassment that may follow from having a pornographic interest or engaging in pornographic behaviors may internalize itself, resulting in a decline in mental health and general life satisfaction. Pornography can excite the brain’s reward system, which can lead to severe brain alterations akin to those found in drug addictions. Compulsive sexual behaviors are also linked to early pornography exposure.^{27,28} By showing an absence of emotional connection between consensual couples, unprotected sexual contact, and, occasionally, violence and rape, pornography normalizes sexual harm. Male adolescents may learn that it is okay and even desired to act violently and aggressively toward and degrade their female partners from the aggressive and violent depictions of women that are prevalent in much of today’s popular pornography.

Table 1 illustrates some of the differences between healthy sexual behavior and porn-driven sexual behaviors (as understood by porn users).

The Indian Context and Pornography in Children/Adolescents: Legislations and Possible Solutions

Pornography and sex-related content, in India, has always been a stigmatized topic. Fearing the unforgiving judgments

Table 2. Provisions in POCSO Act, 2012 With Regard to Child Pornography.

Offence	Imprisonment Under POCSO Act
Use of child for pornographic purposes	Maximum: 5 years
Use of child for pornographic purposes resulting in sexual assault	Minimum: 6 years Maximum: 8 years
Use of child for pornographic purposes resulting in aggravated sexual assault	Minimum: 8 years Maximum: 10 years
Use of child for pornographic purposes resulting in penetrative sexual assault	Minimum: 10 years Maximum: Life imprisonment
Use of child for pornographic purposes resulting in aggravated penetrative sexual assault	Life imprisonment

Source: The POCSO Act, Gazette of India, 19th June, 2012.

from friends or family, adolescents are hesitant to talk about their habit of consuming this content. From moral dilemmas against watching to other people have sex to the possible feelings of shame or guilt for their “porn preference,” talking about porn to make conversation is considered a taboo. There are recent developments with an intention to safeguard child/adolescent pornography usage as well as for protection of involvement of child/minors in pornography.

Rules and Regulations in Relation to Child Pornography

The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012 came into force in 2012 which gives protection to children from sexual offenses (Table 2). The POCSO act has special provisions for protection of children from child pornography.

Porn Ban

India’s first attempt at banning any form of pornographic content was in 2015. In August 2015, the Indian government banned access to 857 porn sites and instructed the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) to issue an order to Internet service providers (ISPs) to block access to these 857 adult sites. After facing the aftermath, surprisingly the Government of India was criticized by various measures. Subsequently, the government rescinded its decision a week later and only held up the ban for child pornography sites. Three years later, the porn ban was revived. On October 27, 2018, the DoT instructed 5 of the largest ISPs of India to ban 827 pornographic websites from their network.²⁹

Promoting Sex Education in Schools/Colleges

One of the possible methods to at least minimize the effect of pornography is to promote sex education in schools and colleges. There is an immediate need to inculcate sex education

in the curriculum in order to prevent the development of wrong notions about sexuality among adolescents.³⁰ Any form of exposure to pornographic content should be considered as health threat to adolescents, should implement interventions aimed at increasing parental monitoring of children's pornographic media exposure, and reducing the degree to which youth identify with and perceive the sexual exploits of pornography personas as realistic and acceptable.

Future Directions: What We Can Do?

Although there has been an increase in interest in sexuality and pornography usage in adolescence in recent years, there are currently few studies that analyze the relationship between these elements and other essential components of stage of development/adolescence. It is therefore critical to conduct studies that aim to create and test theoretical models that allow for the conceptualization and identification of putative phenotypes linked with adolescent pornography consumption. Furthermore, the gap between the scientific and clinical domains is widening, necessitating a strategy that prioritizes effective care for adolescents seeking help for problematic pornography usage.

At the clinical level, assessing the use of pornography in therapeutic evaluations will be of importance in order to discover how pornography may influence teenage psychosexual development. Furthermore, if the person frequently uses pornography, the sexual lifestyle and quality of life, as well as potential sexual risk behaviors should be considered. Because problematic pornography usage may be linked to other psychiatric illnesses, discovering it may aid in addressing the implications of these conditions. In this regard, analyzing adolescent pornography consumption can be beneficial in detecting early maladaptive personality traits such as excessive novelty seeking, impulsiveness, violent/aggressive behavior, and reward reliance.

A comprehensive knowledge of the interaction between these multiple associated factors connected with the use of pornography will allow clinical experts to perform better prevention, early detection, and diagnosis of teenage sexuality disorders. Precise detection of predisposing, precipitating factors of pornography use, along with the potential consequences of pornography use, could also assist clinicians in differentiating between pornography use and problematic pornography use, a concept that is becoming increasingly important in both the clinical setting and the research field.

In terms of the Indian context, there is a dearth of study on pornography's negative impacts. Future studies on adolescents' use of pornography must have a developmental perspective considering the significant developmental changes that occur during adolescence. Additionally, studies are needed to better understand disparities linked to gender, cultural elements, and understudied groups like lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, and transgender youth.

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